

MEMORANDUM

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TO: C. Wolf, Jr.

DATE: 7/18/69

FROM: Charles Cooper

MEMO NO.: M-4737

SUBJECT: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAOS FOR VIETNAM

COPIES TO: H. Rowen, D. Ellsberg, M. Gurtov, O. Hoeffding, F. Iklé, K. Kellen, R. Komer, P. Langer, G. Pauker

This will be a short memo to present the bare bones of a simple idea. But since the idea is heretical, it seemed worth writing.

Background

During the three days I spent in Laos, the impression of intensified NVN pressure was confirmed. My friends there said they believe there has been a major, irreversible and devastating change in NVN policy and behavior in Laos in the last year: more troops, more fighting, more territory, more determination, etc. The fall of Muong Soui was not a fluke, not a simple tit-for-tat for the transient occupation of Xieng-Khouangville by Vang Pao in April (a brilliant surprise thrust). They don't expect the NVN to stop there. The Embassy position on these matters is very different; nothing has changed, Laos has always been a funny little country.

The NVN troops used to capture Munog Soui were well equipped (including a dozen tanks and 122mm rockets) and well trained.

The Chinese are building a road from Muong Sai to Dien Bien Phu -- probably. Some fear it will turn to the west and/or south, but that now looks unlikely. Nobody has any clear idea why the Chinese are building the road.

Vang Pao's Meo forces have been badly chewed up in the heavy fighting on the last five years; there aren't enough of them left to be a potent military force for too much longer. In the south, Phasouk's morale and prestige has been hurt by the U.S. scuttling of the Wapi cluster, and by increased enemy pressure. In part for reasons of economy FAR is about 15 percent below its authorized force level. The neutralist troops ran away at Muong Soui -- and presumably will run again. In general, FAR is being swamped.

Hanoi has also been stepping up the political pressure. The talks between her Ambassador and Souvanna this spring were reportedly vague -- but the general theme was clearly an attempt to put pressure on Souvanna to help curtail U.S. bombing, to give more scope to the PL, etc. And his bargaining counter: PAVN activity in Laos. The talks failed: Souvanna gave no ground. Since then

there has been Muong Soui -- and the recent policy statement by the PL that they no longer consider the RLG to express the tripartite formula laid out in the Geneva accords.

Hypothesis

Laos is the Achilles heel of a troop-reduction, casualty-cutting, cost-reduction strategy in SVN.

Argument

1. In SVN, almost in spite of ourselves, the ability of the indigenous forces to fight to a stand-off against Hanoi with only material support, has increased. I don't want to argue this debatable point here, since what I want to stress is the unquestioned difference in this regard between SVN and Laos. In Laos, nothing stands between Hanoi and its objectives -- and nothing internal between Hanoi and Vientiane except self-restraint. If Hanoi decides to occupy Vientiane, FAR can't prevent it.

2. Hanoi is, or is becoming, frustrated militarily in SVN. If U.S. political weakness is reduced by pulling out troops, etc., this frustration will look like a serious problem to Hanoi. Laos is where they can try to restore the old dilemma for the U.S.: stand by and watch debacle, or intervene and intensify the political crisis at home.

3. Well short of overt occupation of Vientiane and the Mekong Valley, a step-up in NVN activity will begin to put Souvanna in an agonizing position: watch his country fall apart -- bloodily, or cooperate with Hanoi in trying to curtail U.S. bombing, give the PL real authority, etc. It would be stupid to take Souvanna's past reliability as evidence that he will never crack. The enemy can put on much more pressure and when (if) it does, Souvanna will have to reconsider. One piece of evidence cited as indicating Souvanna's staunchness is his continued advocacy of U.S. bombing of North Vietnam. But the moral of this is quite different: after we've made it clear for the umpteenth time that we have no intention of resuming the bombing, Souvanna may eventually get the point. And the point is that he can't rely on us to save his country.

4. Suppose it happens -- and we have, either through military occupation or coalition government, a situation in which Hanoi controls Vientiane and the Mekong plain. What do we do?

- a. Probably nothing. And this is a tempting policy. Turn the tables on the other side: let them play Napoleon in Moscow for a change. But it isn't prudent to overlook the problems this would raise.

- b. The Thais are unlikely to be as relaxed as we might be. And they may be prepared and even determined, to act. If they are, our dilemma will be very acute. It's worth speculating whether Thai intervention could stave off PAVN. Probably they could since logistics is so markedly in their favor. But we couldn't avoid getting involved -- either to help them, or to prevent them. And either way it will be agonizing. And then again they may not be prepared to act -- but only to urge us to do so. Then when we don't Thai realists will again draw the logical conclusion.
 - c. Hanoi's domination of Laos would also give them a durable sanctuary from which to keep the pressure on in SVN -- at little cost. Not that much different from the present situation, but enough different to be a major concern.
 - d. What would the impact be in Cambodia? I don't know the answer but it looks to me like an interesting question.
 - e. Finally, there is the very broad problem of our tacit acquiescence in the military occupation of a small friendly country by a large neighbor -- in a situation where the element of civil war is minor. Anybody who thinks this cost is trivial is more cynical than I, but I'm willing to learn more about the degradation of the American character.
5. To predict the future, you have to explain the past. Why hasn't Hanoi moved decisively in Laos before this? I don't know the answer but I'm willing to take a stab at it. Hanoi has always seen risks in moving further in Laos: U.S. reaction -- political and military, problems with the Soviet Union, perhaps problems with China, problems with public attitudes elsewhere in the world, concern about stirring up the Thai. And as long as the war in SVN was going well they had what they needed: the Ho Chi Minh trail. And Vietnam priority is as real for Hanoi as for us: why waste men and resources in Laos? But when the situation in SVN begins to look worrisome the calculation changes: higher returns may raise the priorities and make the risk worthwhile.
6. If I'm right, Laos is going to be a tough problem (unless the war in SVN ends soon through a negotiated settlement in Paris). What sort of competence does the USG and U.S. Mission in Vientiane have to deal with the problem as it emerges? Lousy is the answer. In the first place USG attitudes carry the baggage of the Geneva Accords and the philosophy they expressed: USSR plays a key role, tripartism is the answer, etc. Secondly, we have a new Ambassador with no background and presumably only average competence. Third,

TO: C. Wolf, Jr.

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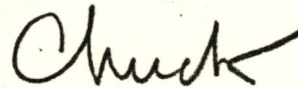
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there is nobody at a senior level in Washington able or willing to take Laos seriously; by the time somebody does it will be late in the game. Fourth, the U.S. Mission is only beginning to emerge from a period of chaos, back-biting, and destructive competition. It isn't today a cohesive Mission and hasn't been for years. Finally, the U.S. has no policy in Laos -- a problem closely associated with the lack of policy in SVN -- and trying to construct one will be beyond our capability.

Moral

Laos is a mess -- but it isn't true that it can't get worse. It will.



Charles Cooper

CAC:jm

Attach.

P.S. This memo was written yesterday before I learned of the news in the attached clipping.

Los Angeles Times, July 18, 1969

N. VIETNAM DIVISION REPORTEDLY IN LAOS

VIENTIANE, Laos (UPI)—A full division of North Vietnamese "mountaineer" troops behind 60 Russian-built tanks was reported moving into northern Laos Thursday. Laotian commanders said the situation was deteriorating rapidly.

The National Assembly convened in Vientiane in an atmosphere of crisis.

There were reports of new fighting around Muong Soui, a Laotian stronghold which fell to North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces two and one-half weeks ago. Military sources said at least 500 pro-government neutralist troops had thrown down their weapons and deserted in the last three weeks.

Acting Premier Leuam Insiengmay convened the National Assembly session and dispatched neutralist leader Prince Sisoumang Sisaleumsak to the royal capital of Luang Prabang for urgent con-

sultations with King Savang Vathana.

The Russian tanks were identified as amphibious PT-76's a model which has been seen in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese division was said to be composed mainly of Meo and "black Thai" hill tribesmen.